Introduction: an anthropology of separation

> After the separation of death, one can eventually swallow back one's grief; but the separation of the living is an endless, unappeasable anxiety.
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> Tu Fu, Tang dynasty poet (eighth century AD)[1]

> When two friends or relatives meet who have been separated from one another for a few weeks or longer, they greet each other by sitting down, one on the lap of the other, with their arms around each other's necks, and weeping and wailing for two or three minutes till they are tired. Two brothers greet each other in this way, and so do father and son, mother and son, mother and daughter, and husband and wife. When husband and wife meet, it is the man who sits on the lap of the woman. When two friends part from one another, one of them lifts up the hand of the other towards his mouth and gently blows on it.
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> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders*[2]

This book ends with a local matter, so-called: the passions aroused by the potential reunification of Taiwan with mainland China.[3] Dangerous territory! But it begins very differently, with a 'universalist' hypothesis: that the existential constraint of death (which anthropologists since Frazer have repeatedly discussed), is merely a subset of the existential constraint of separation (which anthropologists since Frazer have arguably . . . well, *obscured* – and thus in some ways ignored). Of course, as I'll explain below, anthropologists *have* dealt with separation in many complex senses: as an aspect of cultural psychology, as a near-universal feature of rituals, as an old problem 'made new' by the era of global displacements, and so on. But they've arguably failed to grasp the centrality of separation as a human dilemma in its own right. This is unfortunate, to say the least, for separation experiences (best viewed, I'll suggest, from a realist perspective, i.e. one which at least starts by taking its object literally) have crucial social and psychological effects. They are, in short, productive. Be that as it may, between my 'universalist' beginning and my 'localist' ending – both of which are likely, although for completely different reasons, to be controversial – I'll hopefully be on safer ground. (As Deng Xiaoping once famously remarked: 'When crossing a stream, grab onto the stones.') Using ethnography

from Taiwan and mainland China, I'll describe, bit by bit, the Chinese fascination with separation and its counterpart, reunion. This is in order to illustrate, by the end of the book, how the elaboration in China of a universal constraint – separation – helps set the stage for, and arguably even intensifies, the highly contentious Chinese politics of unity.

It happens that in China processes of separation and reunion, epitomised in moments of parting and return which involve both the living and the dead, are often a matter of great concern. In fact, at times it seems that going away and coming back again are even *more* significant, *vis-à-vis* certain kinds of relationships, than any fixed state of being together. My evidence for this is of various kinds, but was mostly collected during anthropological fieldwork in two different localities: one in rural north-eastern mainland China and one in rural southeastern Taiwan. There – that is to say in both places – in everyday social encounters and conversations, in formal rules of etiquette and politeness, in celebrations of calendrical festivals, in rituals of kinship and of the life-cycle, in procedures for dealing with gods and with the dead, in ideas about food and eating, in notions related to doors and social space, in classical poetry and literature, and even in heated (and sometimes 'enchanting') political rhetoric, the Chinese fascination with separation and reunion is made manifest time and again. Of course, these manifestations occur in different contexts, and the Chinese terms and expressions used in relation to them are captured only roughly by the English terms 'separation' and 'reunion'.[4] However both the manifestations and the terms do share some striking family resemblances. For instance, 'greeting' (*jie*) and 'sending-off' (*song*) guests is often a complex and sometimes even convoluted matter in China, while the elaborate 'greeting' (*jie*) and 'sending-off' (*song*) of ancestors and gods is at the very core of Chinese religious life.

Of course, the stringing together of examples of this kind may be misleading and even productive of category errors, not least through helping us conflate Chinese and Taiwanese ethnography. But it also helps generate some compelling arguments, because Chinese practices and idioms of separation and reunion, when viewed together, imply a coherent way of thinking about *all* human and spiritual relationships – which are always seen to be in flux, in a very fundamental sense, and therefore repeatedly subject to partings and returns. This, in turn, has concrete implications for Chinese historical consciousness. For to grow up in China is, by definition, to have one's life, and one's personal emotional history, punctuated by the informal and ritualised separations and reunions which are realised in all families and communities over time. These help people situate themselves in relation to other people, in relation to places, and in

relation to the flow of time and events. In short, they contribute to the sense Chinese people have of themselves as subjects in history.

But not – of course! – in a simple or straightforward way. To cite only one (yes, predictable) complication: the public elaboration of leave-takings in China seems, in many circumstances, inversely proportional to the emotional closeness of the attachments in question. More trouble is often taken over separations from distant associates and honoured guests, than over those from close relatives and friends. The physical departure of the latter often even passes unremarked, in part, as I will argue, because separations of this kind are made to seem *impossible*. Meanwhile, as one might expect, even 'impossible' separations (e.g. between fathers and sons) are sometimes very desirable indeed, while others (e.g. between parents and daughters) are seen, however unwanted, to be socially necessary. Owing to these and other complications, an argument along the lines I propose is undoubtedly difficult to substantiate. But I hope that in this book I will at least succeed in making comprehensible my viewpoint and in conveying the interest and importance of a subject which was more or less forced upon me by Chinese friends.

And I must stress: it was never my intention to study separation and reunion, as such. Instead, I've gradually formulated it as an area for research over a period of years, through linking together certain of my reactions to fieldwork in Dragon-head, a farming community in north-eastern China, and in Angang, a fishing community in southeastern Taiwan.[5] It struck me, for example, that people in Angang and Dragon-head seemed very disinclined to bring certain public 'reunion' banquets to an end, by way of contrast with ordinary meals which they usually seemed happy enough to race through. I noticed that when I left these two places, even temporarily, certain kinds of people made a fuss over my departure, whereas everyday partings between friends and kin seemed almost wilfully abrupt. I was surprised to learn, while living in Angang, that a great many occasions in Chinese popular religion relate directly to, and even derive their primary meaning from, the arrival and departure of deities and other spirits. (To be honest, I was surprised to learn that these spirits moved at all, having assumed that they were simply *there*.) I also realised, while living in Dragon-head, that passages and entryways such as doors and gates – spaces for 'sending-off' and 'greeting' which are almost always architecturally elaborated or decorated in some way – are often important and problematic during rituals and social events. I learned that the word for such entryways, *men* (door/gate), can be used to designate, among other things, a 'family' or 'clan'. Later, a friend drew my attention to the existence of an entire genre of Chinese classical poetry related directly to the emotions of 'sending off' (*song*), a genre which to this day provides friends and

acquaintances with appropriate 'words of parting' (*bieci*). These diverse social realities – prolonged meals, emotional leave-takings, expensive rituals, elaborate doors, sentimental verses – are easily observable in China and Taiwan, and they all share a traceable connection. That is, they all relate in some way to the problem of separation. But how specifically Chinese is the matter to which these realities have drawn my attention?

Separation as a universal constraint

Anthropologists are meant to be professionally fascinated with cultural variation, but in fact they often dwell on aspects of human experience – such as birth, reproduction, and death – which *transcend*, at a fundamental level, cultural and historical variability, and which all human societies must deal with in some way. Of course, this qualification ('in some way') lies behind many long-standing anthropological debates about the limits of cultural variability, as well as some newer ones influenced by cognitive and evolutionary science. I don't intend to rehearse these matters here (for a useful overview see Brown 1991), nor am I personally interested in fishing expeditions for new universals. But the existence of common constraints across diverse cultural environments clearly does help to explain, on a very basic level, certain shared human realities. It helps us grasp, for example, why *underlying patterns* of things as seemingly 'private' as emotions (cf. Myers 1988), or as 'culturally-specific' as rituals (cf. Bloch 1992), are found instead to be widely distributed in human populations. These distributions are a function of our common natural history; and while this doesn't necessarily diminish the strangeness of what happens in other times and places, it does underline the fact that what would seem truly strange would be a time or place in which such constraints did not exist – e.g. where people did not die.

This brings me back to separation. The aim of this introduction is to suggest that separation, which anthropologists have generally *not* taken to be a common or universal human constraint, should be so taken, and also to suggest that it is amongst the most important of them all. Let me state my general premise as simply as possible. All human beings of course engage in social relations of various kinds, however it is presumably quite rare – given the spatial, temporal, and cultural realities in which most people in most societies live – for the entire set of any one person's relations to be physically present simultaneously, much less for any length of time. Instead, those with whom we are socially engaged (including parents, siblings, lovers, spouses, children, neighbours, friends, enemies, and so on – however culturally defined) arrive and depart throughout our lives, in some cases many times in a single day. The resulting separations may be momen-

tary or permanent, mundane or dramatic, longed-for or deeply regretted, and obviously they are culturally patterned. But repeated *physical* separations in various forms – including, ultimately, in the form of death – are surely an inevitable feature of human life; and, as I will discuss in a moment, they surely everywhere stand in a complex relationship with various forms of *emotional* and *social* separation and distance. These facts, which may seem obvious, or even trivial, deserve further consideration, as does the possibility of their universal distribution. For the unavoidable reality of separation – and perhaps especially in its most 'simplistic' material (or realist) forms – can present human beings with exceptional, at times wholly intractable, dilemmas.

Awareness of separation and awareness of death

But in what contexts, and at what stages in the human life-cycle, do these dilemmas become salient? As I'll discuss in a moment, many psychological theories have given a central place to infantile 'attachment' and 'separation', and to the role of these processes in human emotional development. Briefly, they hold that infants develop a sense of self partly through encounters with persons who become, for them, key objects of attachment and desire, and who are present and then absent in both literal and much more abstract senses. While mastering their considerable distress at separation, children begin to measure their own *autonomy and dependency*, and thus to comprehend human relatedness.

Now this perspective implies that children should be aware of, and in fact skilled in, certain issues which arise from the separation constraint quite early in life – and arguably long *before* they are aware of the kinds of constraints on which anthropologists have primarily focussed their collective attention. Here a telling comparison may be drawn with the awareness of death, to which separation is closely linked in emotional terms. Psychological evidence (to be discussed below) suggests, surprisingly to my mind, that for most young children death is *not* especially salient as a conscious concern or explicit anxiety. One possible explanation for this is that they do not yet fully grasp the relevant concepts. As the cognitive scientist Susan Carey notes, a range of cross-cultural evidence suggests that children's awareness of death moves through three developmental stages (Carey 1985, cf. Slaughter et al. 1999). In the first (up to approximately age five), death is normally 'assimilated to the notions of sleep and departure', and its emotional impact derives from seeing it as 'a sorrowful separation and/or as the ultimate act of aggression' (Carey 1985: 60). To die is 'to live in some other place . . . from which one cannot return' (Slaughter et al. 1999). The second stage is transitional; in this, children grasp the finality of death, but

they still see the 'causes of death as external to the dying person' (Carey 1985: 61). Only in the last stage (which begins around age nine or ten), is death understood to be a process which is both internal ('organic') and inevitable (1985: 64). In sum, while young children have an early awareness of the concept of death, they tend at first to conflate it with sleep *and separation*, and only gradually do they comprehend it in biological/organic terms. (Carey suggests this can only happen once they are cognitively equipped to comprehend it, i.e. once they are equipped with an intuitive 'biological theory' which makes death comprehensible.)

Leaving aside issues of cognitive development, as such, this material of course leaves open many interpretive questions, including the question of what it *means* to say that a ten-year-old, or indeed an eighty-year-old, living in a particular social context, 'now understands death'. This matter has been addressed, at least indirectly, by Renato Rosaldo in his discussion of death, 'positionality', and the accumulation of experience. Rosaldo describes his own incomprehension, *as an adult*, and over a period of many years, of claims by senior men among the Ilongot (of the Philippines) that their head-hunting activities were a translation into enraged action of the grief felt upon the death of loved ones (1993: 3). But he says this 'powerful rage' *did* finally become comprehensible to him following the sudden accidental death of his wife during fieldwork (1993: 3). Reflecting years later on this traumatic event, Rosaldo observes that 'ethnographic knowledge tends to have the strengths and limitations given by the relative youth of field-workers who, for the most part, have not suffered serious losses and could have, for example, no personal knowledge of how devastating the loss of a long-term partner can be for the survivor' (1993: 9). Emotional inexperience (which in this particular instance might easily extend into old age) has methodological implications for anthropology; but Rosaldo's more general point is that the relationship of *everyone* to death – and to any culturally conceived category such as 'death' – is inevitably transformed with age and experience (1993: 16–21).

Awareness or comprehension, in this sense, is undoubtedly a life-long task; and just as a child might begin to process the separation constraint early in life, so they might begin to process the death constraint. But evidence suggests that for most young children – and is the same not true for most young adults? – death remains a *relatively* unfamiliar and incomprehensible matter, and one which is routinely conflated by them with separation. This process of conflation moreover takes place precisely during the time of life when separation is arguably their *central* existential (or psychological) concern. Given the growing anthropological interest in children as producers rather than inheritors of cultural forms, the developmental priority of the separation constraint is potentially of considerable

significance. But this is not simply a matter of 'child psychology'. For when adults eventually grapple with key emotional dilemmas, including both the problems of love (i.e. the emotions of romantic attachment) and the problems of death (i.e. the emotions of grief and mourning), they arguably do so via their previous, i.e. infantile, grasp of separation. But in order to explain this – and before discussing anthropological accounts of separation – I must make a brief psychoanalytic detour, starting with Freud.

The psychology of separation

In psychology and psychoanalysis, it is routine to take separation and absence as defining features of human relationships, rather than as epiphenomenal. The basic issues are neatly illustrated in Freud's famous, oft-cited, discussion of *fort* and *da* in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (and we might well ask why so many commentators have been *struck* by this simple passage):

> [The boy] did not disturb his parents at night, he conscientiously obeyed orders not to touch certain things or go into certain rooms, and above all he never cried when his mother left him for a few hours. At the same time, he was greatly attached to his mother, who had not only fed him herself but had also looked after him without any outside help. This good little boy, however, had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o', accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word '*fort*' ['gone']. I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them.
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> One day I made an observation which confirmed my view. The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful '*da*' ['there']. This, then, was the complete game – disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act.
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> The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child's great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation (that is, the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction) which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting. He compensated for this, as it were, by himself staging the disappearance and return of the objects within his reach . . . The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent.

> How then does his repetition of this distressing experience fit in with the pleasure principle? It may perhaps be said in reply that her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending. (Freud 1955: 15–16)

This anecdote forms part of an essay in which Freud discusses the compulsive repetition of what are presumably unpleasant experiences (e.g. when people repeatedly dream of traumatic events). Such repetitions are controversially interpreted by Freud as manifestations of an unconscious 'death instinct',[6] but also as attempts to replace a passive response to 'unpleasure' with mastery. Of course, in Freud's scheme the prototypical experience of 'unpleasure' is the inevitable *failure* of infants to achieve their early libidinal goals. Such rejection experiences, he suggests, are compulsively re-enacted by neurotics, but also to some extent by everybody else – e.g. by infants in their games. Freud thus uses the *fort/da* game as a simple illustration of how the 'reality principle' (a realistic acknowledgement of the obstacles to pleasure) works in conjunction with, and to some extent helps one to master, the 'pleasure principle' (the instinctive desire to maximise pleasure and minimise unpleasure). In his anecdote, the mother's ability to physically walk out of the room clearly stands for something much more complex: her real or imagined emotional 'distance', i.e. her ability not to be mastered by her son's desires. But the *crisis* is provoked by her literal departure. And it is striking that the temporary resolution of the crisis is a symbolic or conceptual one: for Freud this is precisely the birth of symbolism! The child, rather than protesting against something which he cannot in any case control, instead symbolically replays the unpleasant experience and makes it his own.

Freud notably describes this as a great *cultural* achievement, a characterisation of a scrap of child's-play which perhaps needs some explanation. Recall that for Freud the problem of separation from the mother is really a subset of the more general problem of the Oedipus Complex. In a later essay, Freud discusses the significance of typical early childhood dilemmas – including the non-availability of the original 'object-choice', the mother – for subsequent emotional states, *and* for the child's developing ability to master his own desires. According to Freud, this ability is achieved, in part, via the internalisation of external obstacles:

> The child's parents, and especially his father, were perceived as the obstacle to a realization of his Oedipus wishes; so his infantile ego fortified itself for the carrying out of the repression by erecting this same obstacle within itself. It borrowed strength to do this, so to speak, from the father, and this loan was an extraordinarily momentous act. (1995: 642)

Why momentous? In part because the mastery of desire – or, to return to *fort* and *da*, the mastery of physical/emotional separation from the mother – is, for Freud, crucial to normal human development. But also (thus Freud) because the father-inspired mastery of desire stands behind all of man's great cultural achievements, and behind his sense of social propriety. As Jessica Benjamin puts it: 'Obedience to the laws of civilization is first inspired, not by fear or prudence, Freud tells us, but by love, love for those early powerful figures who first demand obedience' (Benjamin 1990: 5). Obstacles to desire (including physical distance from its object) are therefore *socially productive*; and 'separation anxiety', in a very extended sense, is thus an important link between Freud's psychology and his sociology.

Needless to say, a great many questions have been asked of Freud's 'obvious interpretation' of the *fort/da* game, and of his psychological and sociological theories in general. But I've cited him in order to illustrate a certain influential *view* of the development of human emotions and subjectivity, in which early separation and object-loss plays a central, indeed defining, role. But how should separation itself be conceived? Given human imaginative capacities, what exactly is *meant* by it? Is literal physical presence and absence relevant at all?

All post-Freudian psychoanalytic theories have necessarily dealt, in some way, with these questions, and in trying to grasp the debates in a vast literature, I've relied on the synthetic discussion by Greenberg and Mitchell (1983).[7] As they note, the contrast between 'drive theory' and 'object-relations theory' helps to clarify the history of psychoanalytic enquiry. Briefly, within classic Freudian drive theory, which suggests that human behaviour is fundamentally motivated by *internal* drives, an 'external object' (which might or might not be a real person, such as a mother) is primarily the target of a drive, and either helps or hinders its discharge. In this distinctly internalist model, developed primarily from the psychoanalytic treatment of adults, 'social ties are secondary' (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983: 45). Whereas in what is now conventionally known as object-relations theory, priority is given to *external* social ties. An attempt is made to 'confront the potentially confounding observation that people live simultaneously in an external and an internal world, and that the relationship between the two ranges from the most fluid intermingling to the most rigid separation' (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983: 12). Although Freudian drive theory is obviously concerned as well with this intermingling (as seen in the *fort/da* anecdote), the theoretical shift is fundamental. For in object-relations theory 'the creation, or re-creation of specific modes of relatedness with others replaces drive discharge as the force motivating human behaviour' (Greenberg and Mitchell 1983: 3).

This paradigm shift – which may be seen as a move towards empiricism or 'realism' – occurred in part for one rather straightforward methodological reason. Early attempts to extend psychoanalytic theories and therapies, which relied significantly on adult reconstructions of childhood, to the actual treatment of children proved highly problematic. This, in turn, compelled a move away from conventional Freudian psychoanalysis, and towards *naturalistic* observation (e.g. of child's play). This reorientation, which ultimately leads towards development psychology, has been productive, but of course controversial within the psychoanalytic movement itself.[8] Some theorists, e.g. Margaret Mahler, have tried to bridge the divide by holding onto (internalist) Freudian drive theory, while combining it with (externalist) observation-oriented accounts of child development.[9] John Bowlby, however, is one of those who, while remaining loyal to basic Freudian paradigms, moved sharply in the direction of a realist orientation: he and his colleagues closely studied, among other things, the reactions of infants when their mothers literally walked out of the room. (It might even be suggested that their naturalistic orientation made a research focus on easily observable separation anxiety almost inevitable.)

A realist view of separation

Bowlby is the central figure in what has come to be known as 'attachment theory', and I will discuss his work in some detail here because of the issues it raises (for an overview see Holmes 1993 and Parkes et al. 1991).[10] For Bowlby, as for Freud, the nature of adult emotional life is importantly shaped by the quality of early emotional attachments: through the resolution of separation dilemmas (broadly defined) in childhood, we develop 'internal working models' of our own likely position in key relationships. For this reason, Bowlby did *not* see his research as merely addressing narrow questions of infant psychology. On the contrary, an understanding of attachment and separation in childhood should directly illuminate adult emotional life, crucially including the emotions associated with romantic attachment (cf. Hazan and Shaver 1987), and patterns of mourning following death and loss (see below). Bowlby's most famous, and much-debated, contention was that a direct correlation existed between the temporary or permanent loss of a mother-figure and of maternal care during childhood, and the onset of psychiatric problems later in life. But this is not to say that in Bowlby's model processes of attachment and separation, as such, are seen to be pathological. On the contrary, in attachment theory the *normal* course of child development includes not only the building up of strong attachments, but also the healthy expression of *instinctive* separation anxiety when these attachments are threatened.